CHAPTER 15

Conjurational Contraptions

Techno-Hermeneutics, Mechanical Wizardry, and the Material Culture of African American Folk Magic

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Introduction

The diverse corpus of vernacular magical, divinatory, and healing practices associated with the Afro-American Gulf South, variously called "Hoodoo," "Rootwork," "Conjure," etc. provides a fascinating glimpse into a world of "everyday esoterica." Here, profound mysteries drawn from spirit filled African and Afro-Caribbean religions, from the sacramental traditions of the Catholic Church, and from the *grimoires* and mystical texts of European occultism are blended together in a rich, multi-flavored *gumbo* and applied to the most prosaic and quotidian of struggles. How does one secure a job? Stop a lover from straying? Win at cards or dice? Keep the law away from a bootlegging business? Practitioners of Hoodoo envision a world of constantly competing human desires, which move and are moved by an uncountable array of malign and benign spiritual forces. These forces can be marshaled, directed or brought to bay through the skillful application of powerful substances whose symbolic or aesthetic qualities afford them meaning in the communicative register of Conjure.

One of the most substantial published compilations of Hoodoo lore and practice emerges from the field research of avocational Folklorist Harry Middleton Hyatt, who, in the late 1930's, initiated a long-term project documenting African-American folk traditions with emphasis on ritual practice and supernatural belief. His work resulted in the creation of a monumental folklore collection: a massive five-volume compendium published between 1970 and 1978 entitled *Hoodoo—Conjuration—Witchcraft—Rootwork*. Folkloristic methodologies and approaches—in particular the analysis of beliefs and practices collected in face to face interaction with everyday folks—are crucial to the study of African American religious experience. As Mark Leone and Gladys Marie-Fry maintain, in interdisciplinary dialogue with other branches of the humanities or social sciences, Folklore studies can serve to introduce "context, meaning…emotion, and enormous breadth"—establishing traditional frameworks for phenomena that at first glance appear unique or idiosyncratic (Leone/Marie-Fry 1999: 375). Folkloristic perspectives allow ordinary—often

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marginalized—voices to be heard on their own terms, and can vastly enrich the database of what we know about lived religious and esoteric experience. Of comparable value is the continued re-examination and re-analysis of extant collections of African American folk belief (as I am attempting here). While such collections are invariably influenced by the biases and preconceptions of their collectors—and Hyatt is no exception in this regard—his propensity for voluminous, largely unvarnished documentation yields an archive that is remarkably detailed, rich, and expressive, affording opportunities for those who come after to mine this work in the service of increasingly nuanced, complex, and accurate perspectives on African American esoteric belief and praxis.

Like comparable, albeit less comprehensive collections of conjure lore (Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, or Hurston's "Hoodoo in America," for example) the Hyatt collection includes detailed descriptions of vernacular rituals intended to harm or to heal with a diverse pharmacopeia of herbs, roots, oils, candles and other *materia sacra*. These substances Yvonne Chireau maintains, are selected for both "sympathetic associations and for aesthetic purposes. Red pepper to produce heat or irritation, lodestone to draw desirable forces…bone fragments to symbolize the passage of powers from the otherworld…The inventory of conjuring materials has remained remarkably consistent for hundreds of years" (Chireau 2003). In his seminal work *Conjuring Culture,* Theophus Smith convincingly argues that Conjure articulates the world as *pharmacosm*—a universe composed of healing and harming—*tonic and toxic*—substances, acts, and entities. These concrete symbols are the stuff out of which a network of complex relations is defined, negotiated, and transformed, establishing what Smith identifies as the hallmarks of "conjuring culture(s)" (Smith 2004).

Thus far, scholars who write about Conjure have tended to emphasize, indeed to privilege, the explicitly *natural* elements of the Hoodoo pharmacopeia—essentially keeping the roots front and center in discussions of rootwork. As Zora Neale Hurston would have it: "'Roots' is the Southern Negro's term for folk-doctoring by herbs and prescriptions, and by extension, and because all hoodoo doctors cure by roots, it may be used as a synonym for 'hoodoo'" (Hurston 1931, 117). This tendency supports perceptions of Conjure as a practice largely associated with slave resistance and marronage, and with the idea that African slaves counter an oppressive *toxic* cultural institution with herbal wisdom drawn from a healing—*tonic*—natural wilderness. In the fundamental dialectic of African and Afro-Caribbean religions—that of Village and Bush—the botanical, animal, and mineral powers of the Bush, the Bayou, *El Monte*, etc. are the tools with which one addresses the social problems of the Village or the City (Apter 1992; Brown 1999; Wehmeyer 2005). Hurston, for

example, comparing what she plainly views as "adulterated" conjure in New Orleans with its "purer" form in South Florida, maintains that the former "makes use of the altar, the candles, the incense, the holy water, and blessed oil of the Catholic church. But in Florida, no use is made of such paraphernalia. Herbs, reptiles, insects, and fragments of the human body are their stock in trade." David Brown glosses Frederick Douglass' famous narrative about the root given him by Conjureman Sandy Jenkins. "For Douglass, **the root** was a token of unmatched power, and, one might infer, a sign of African-derived cultural identity in service of the cause of effective resistance to the slave system" (Brown 1990, 5). In light of comments like these, one might be tempted to gloss this *system of esoteric thought and practice* as a simple dialectic which conflates magic, resistance, the natural world, and African heritage, and pits this powerful concoction against an oppressive, hegemonic, White, industrialized society. Black vernacular esotericism is thus pigeonholed as an essentially rural, organic, and ethno-botanical phenomenon.

In reality, however, Conjure defies a simplistic, essentialist analysis. A number of scholars notably Polk (1999), Chireau (2003), Morrow-Long (2001), and Davies (2010) have attested to the centrality in Conjure work of *grimoires* and other writings drawn from Western occultism, inviting further conversations that expand and complicate our understanding of the historical *Roots* (pun intended) of Conjure. Toward a similar end, a close examination of Hyatt's ethnographic record reveals a substantial number of instances in which Rootworkers or their clients describe complex ***machines, gadgets, and technological paraphernalia*** employed for various esoteric operations—including treasure hunting, exorcism, love magic, hexing, and forcing thieves to return stolen goods. In light of what I think is a substantial lacuna in the scholarly treatment of Black vernacular esotericism, I'd like to examine some of the descriptions of magical machinery found in the Hyatt collection, exploring an aspect of Hoodoo's material culture that has been underemphasized, if not plainly ignored by prior researchers. Even a selective exploration of technological tropes in Conjure belief and ritual helps to challenge what might easily become a crippling trend towards a kind of hyper-natural essentialism.

In his examination of the ways in which practitioners of Haitian Vodou evolve new theologies of the *lwa*—Vodou's spirit pantheon—based upon exegeses of paper chromolithographs of Catholic saints, Donald J. Cosentino imaginatively coins the term "chromo-hermeneutics" to describe the process by which these mass produced images are subjected to intense scrutiny and narrative elaboration. Ultimately, he suggests, the chromos become powerful sources "of revelation, open to counteranalyses like rival Christian or Muslim hermeneutics of the same sacred texts" (Cosentino 1997, 303).

In this vein, I think that the verbal descriptions of esoteric technology found in Hyatt—sometimes richly detailed, often enticingly cryptic—reveal a comparable imaginative and interpretive process operating within the practice of Hoodoo/Conjure. This process might be termed "Techno-Hermeneutics"— a tradition of belief and practice in which *machines* of various sorts become metaphors for articulating, interpreting, and working with an omnipresent world of spirit. We need, I believe, to expand the pharmacosm of Hoodoo to include technological elements as well as natural, botanical ones. If the Hyatt material is any indication, both simple and complex machines provide important "tools to think with" in the articulation, mediation, and manipulation of tonic and toxic relations. Exploring the ways in which these practitioners *conjure* with *technology* of various sorts moves us to consider the ways in which they *conjure technology* itself—the ways their beliefs consume and circumscribe machinery and technology, investing these objects and images with spiritual potency and situating them firmly within what Smith might call a *conjurational* worldview.

Mechanical Monetary Mojo: Professor Frank's Treasure Finding Machine

In the early 1940s, one Reverend Young from Mobile Alabama, describes an encounter with a professional Conjure doctor in New Orleans who has been enlisted to help in the recovery of some buried treasure. "Professor Frank" appears before Young clad in a resplendent ritual robe and cap, before an altar decked with horseshoes and other mystic images, and proceeds to read from *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*—thus far, a relatively standard performance for connoisseurs of conjure. But then the Professor does something Young finds both unexpected and powerful:

> He took [us] in his back yard…had a rod that resembles a lightning rod. It was round and was made so it would go up and down at a certain length, a certain depth…*it was like a drill in one end and it was curved like a curved lightning* [*rod*] *wire. And he had some wires attached to it* [*the drill*] *-he apparently had these wires* [*also attached*] *on de wall of his house, possibly the electric wires, and place this machine out in de middle of de yard.* Worked it a certain way that it worked [drilled] itself down in de yard, and stood off from it, *waved his hand like magic and said some peculiar words three different times, and then flames of fire like lightning flamed up three different times at de top of this rod. Well, the man as well as mahself, we stood there amazed because it was - well, now you understand it*. But

> after that he said that regardless of where dis money was buried, if it was an old well, if it was in water anywhere, or it was on dry land, dis machine would be sure to find it [emphasis mine].
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 427

Reverend Young's "amazement" is understandable, given this elaborate performance of conjure ritual culminating in the incorporation of a wondrous machine into an overtly magical rite. Like the robe, the altar, the esoteric incantations, Professor Frank's flaming, sparking contraption is yet another sign of his power. It is an indication that he is master of mysterious forces simultaneously mystical and mechanical in nature. The substantial drama of this conjure performance might make us wonder whether Professor Frank is a mountebank, using his machine as an element of stagecraft to bedazzle a credulous client. That may certainly be true, but for our purposes, what matters most is that a machine like this one is presented as an entirely appropriate, even desirable, tool in the conjure doctor's arsenal. That this machine, while remarkable, is not is not a jarringly anomalous element, but rather an integral part of the process of occult treasure hunting, points to the propensity for techno-hermeneutic thought in Conjure. Reverend Young's account is certainly not unique within the Hyatt corpus. Treasure hunting seems one particular area in which conjure lore is rife with descriptions of complex machinery. Another of Hyatt's informants, from Old Point Comfort, Virginia, offers a description of a mechanically augmented dowsing apparatus:

> They are supposed to have a machine. It's a round thing like a clock and has three points sticking out. One was set for gold, one for silver and the other for brass. It has two handles of hickory. You hold them two handles and walk along like you witch for water. When you walk over hidden money one of them points goes down.
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 402

The following example, from St. Petersburg Florida, involves a pendulum-like machine that facilitates spirit contact in the service of locating buried treasure, harmonizing the mechanistic and animistic elements in Hoodoo cosmology:

> Ah've seen one - it's a little article that hangs on a cord that - *the cord is made of 'lectric* [*wire*] - *it's got 'lectrified* [*needs electric power*] -but chew hand dat cord an' dat ball dat hangs - it a seven-pound ball an' it hangs on it. See, if dat money's anywhere roun' there…Wal now, yo' jest put thar an'

> give it a turn, jest turn it jest de least bit dat-a-way ant yo' talks to it…*Well, dey says, "Spirit" - jest lak whosomever dey name that buried dat money, dey call de first letter of yore name. You say, "Point me to dis money."* An' dat thing will jest wave an' wave till it git dere.
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 407

This unusual object is presented as both an electrified dowsing instrument, and a pendulum for animistic interaction with the spirit world. As with Professor Frank's machine (the use of which is preceded by invocations from a spirit-commanding text) technological gadgetry and spirit contact are not seen as antithetical, but as complimentary aspects of the same ritual.

An interviewee from Waycross Georgia, addresses the traditional Euro-American belief that buried treasure is often guarded by vengeful ghosts or other malevolent supernatural figures, and that the would-be treasure hunter must read a sacred text and inscribe magic circles on the earth to keep the ghosts at bay (see Hand 1980). Hyatt's informant likewise insists that the treasure finding ritual requires a magic circle—but in this case, one made of *electrified wires*:

> Ah ain't nevah done none, but ah hears dey have a needle - a search needle. Read de Bible - King Solomon - an' at de time dat chew is diggin', he have to read dat Bible. *Den yo' have - have to have yo' a dynamo concern, an' yo' have to have wires connected round from dat dynamo - round dat place - an' den dat'll keep dat devilment from coming in dere.* So dey tell me.
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 406

Note that in this latter instance, the technological elements do not entirely supplant earlier traditions of occult treasure finding but are adapted and incorporated into them—perhaps even improving their efficacy. Incantations from the Bible remain, but the invisible supernatural power of a traditional magic circle composed of cabalistic names or substances of power is here re-imagined as electricity coursing through a circle of copper wire—all the better to keep any "devilment" away.

Hex-Tech: Cursing and Curing with Machines

In the Hyatt corpus we find a number of instances of occult machines employed to harm an intended victim. One example, narrated by another informant from Waycross, Georgia, illustrates how concepts of occult technology might

be seamlessly integrated with the practice of traditional herbal "root work." Hyatt's informant describes the weakening of an enemy accomplished by securing his handwriting and signature on a piece of paper "dressed" with "Trumpet Root" (probably *Campsis Radicans*, an herb native to the American Southeast) and Cinquefoil or "Five Finger Grass"—a notable Hoodoo specific used for controlling and compelling:

> If yo' be from heah to New York, or yo' be from heah to Tallahassee, or yo' kin be heah to South Ca'lina, a man would take yore handwriting an' he kin work wit yo' in yore handwriting. Well…he dress dis piece of paper… between lines - yo' write between lines. He dresses it all between lines an' wheresomevah he put 'em, right on down to de closin'. Now after he dress it, why yore name is done signed dere. Well, all right, as long as he wise enough to send to New York to git *a magic drawing glass an' kinda work on dat crystal, balance on it like de movin' picture show* [*the fadeout?*] *an' stick dat clean up in dat magic drawing glass - wasn't but one thing done, an' say could draw yo' right on down, draw yore handwriting right on down to nuthin.* After while den yore fingers git right kinda cramped crossed yore muscle parts…*Dere people wise in de world to send off to New York an' git dese magic drawing glasses an' take it an' work it by 'lectricity - like yo' working* [*the recorder*] *right heah now* - set it ovah behin' like dis is heah, an' dey say, "Draw yore han' down…Yes sir, it will keep yo' down, too - where yo' can't use yore finger, can't shet yore hand, can't pick up yore hat."
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 1165

This tantalizing description makes us wonder what sort of contraption this magic drawing glass actually was. Some of the details call to mind a magic lantern, the focusing apparatus of which could indeed be used to "draw handwriting down to nothing."[1] My own suspicion is that the Magic Drawing Glass was a Balopticon, an electric projector marketed by Bausch and Lomb in the early 20th century, which was not only capable of projecting and manipulating glass slides, but opaque images as well.

Alternately, machines akin to the treasure hunting devices described previously could be used to ferret out hidden magical charms that have been "put

1 The use of magic lanterns in western esoteric practice, particularly late 19th and 20th century Masonic lodge instruction and initiation, is well-attested, and the idea of a projection machine that can weaken or kill its target also suggests the fearsome *Tepaphone* described by Czech Hermeticist Franz Bardon in his occult novel, *Frabato the Magician*.

down" to harm another. Consider this example collected from an informant from Wilmington, North Carolina in the early 1930's, in which the healer uses a machine to find hidden evidence of aggressive rootwork:

> I had a aunt, she got hurt, and it started up in her head and it jes' keep on worryin' her head. …It [was] somepin wrapped up in a little bondle [bundle] and they had it over the door. It was some kinda powder and some sharp instruments in there, look kinda like pins…*It was a rootman find it. He took a little somepin like a watch and laid a fifty cents on that, and anywhere they got anything down, it was a little hand turned* [*either a compass or buried-treasure finder*]*, and that little hand turned toward that door and he went and got it.* He took that [cunjuring object] - I don't know what he did wit it. He gave her some sweet milk and sheep bur and sulphur mixed together. And then she got well.
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 245

Clockwork Conjure

In addition to unusual instruments like those described above, more commonplace elements of technology are also absorbed into the *materia magica* of Conjure. We find alarm clocks, watches, and other time-pieces employed to bring separated lovers together, cause insanity, or exorcise malevolent spirits. The prevailing theme seems to be that the continual, relentless movement of the clockwork combined with steady rhythmic ticking serves to *drive* or *animate* a sacred assemblage towards a specific purpose. We can see this particular idea underlying two examples from Louisiana, the first intended to draw an individual to the operator, the second, to render an enemy "teetotally crazy":

> *Yo' take de pitchure of a person…an' yo' take a little small clock an' yo' stan' dat clock 'side of de person's pitchure. Yo' take a fruit of every kind…a orange an' a apple an' a pear an' a banana or bunch of grapes, an' yo' surround dat pitchure*…den yo' take [a blue candle], an' yo' put it befo' dat pitchure an' yo' light dat light - *an' ev'ry beat of dat clock, as dat clock beats, it's drawin' dat party*. But yo' turn dat pitchure wit de head down - upset 'em yo' see… an' when yo' light dat light yo' call de individual's name dat's on de pitchure. An' de individual dat chew want tuh come back, yo' call dere name. *Now, ev'ry beat of dat clock is goin' tuh bring dat person nearer to de othah - Algiers, Louisiana.*
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 14368

> You write their name nine time on a piece of writing paper you never have used, with an indelible pencil…When you write that name, you got their mind…*If you got a old time clock in your home - Well, you just put that up in there straightways - where that* [*pendulum*] *swings. In nine days time you begin to commence to lose control of your mind. And it just run on like that, until you just go teetotally crazy and they have to take you and put you in the crazy house - New Orleans, Louisiana.*
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 15426

Note, in both of these cases, that it is the persistent audible beat of the clock or the constant movement of the clockwork that is understood to effect the workings of the charm.

Another of Hyatt's informants blends technological sorcery and numismatic magic in a rite of exorcism (for a "place of business") involving a pendulum clock along with two coins frequently incorporated into conjure charms—an Indian head penny and a silver dime:

> *Ah'm goin' tuh drive out witchcraft wit dat clock. Now ah'm goin' git me an old Indian head penny, an' ah'm goin' git me a silver dime…An' ah'm goin' tuh nail dat penny right down on de bottom where dat pendulum will swing ovah it - an' don't 'low* [*allow*] *nobody tuh bother it. An' den dat dime, dat silver dime, ah'm goin' place it up right near where some of dose little wheels will sort of pass by it. An' ah'm goin' time dat clock…to clear off dis whole place of business heah jes' by yore sound – tick tock tick – of every kind of a spirit dat's come in heah tuh do harm, of all de witches an' witchcrafts an' all dat. Ah want chure sound to be a troublin' spirit tuh 'em, an' ah want 'em tuh go from heah runnin'. Well, dat silver dime, it jes' ketch all dat sound; dat penny down dere, dat jes' keep 'em on de move - an' dat pendulum run out every witch dere is in dis State—Waycross, Georgia.*
>
> HYATT 1970,entry 14902

In one of Hyatt's more fascinating interviews, a Conjure man from New Orleans describes a pantheon of hoodoo spirits, including one called "Unkus" who appears as a "little man with a *clock* in his belly":

> He don't look more than that high [8 or 9 inches] with a *little clock on his belly*. A clock to keep time - right in his belly. He's the spirit of the atmosphere. And he got a nose just like a white man…and *he just stand there with a clock in his belly*. And you can tell what time it is - when he come and when he go, any time he appear. And everything you tell him, he

> going to do it. You must be very unsuccessful, unlucky, when you kin get the spirit of Unkus. And he going to assist you.
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 17613

I have elsewhere explored the ways in which the name of this spirit, and its attendant rituals suggest connections to the Bakongo *minkisi* tradition, long considered one of the most important streams of African esoteric thought influencing African American Folk Magic (Wehmeyer 2000).[2] Labeled as fetishes—*feticos* or *"made things"*—by Portuguese colonists, these sacred images house spirits embodied in powerful herbal and animal substances packed into their protruding stomachs and capped with shining mirrors or glass indicating the vital activity of the concealed medicines. The other elements of the ritual mandated by Hyatt's informant, including the sacrifice of infant pigeons and the inscription of sacred signs marked on the earth also suggest strong African, and specifically Bakongo, heritage for this example.[3] But Unkus Man's vivid description of a clockwork homunculus is a powerfully modern techno-hermeneutic reinterpretation of this traditional spiritual aesthetic.[4] In light of the previously discussed traditions of clockwork conjure, what more apt and powerful way to represent the secret yet relentless workings of spirit than the hidden gears and flywheels ticking and spinning away behind the clock-face?

Vehicular Witchery: Conjuring with Wheels

Clock-faces, whirligigs, pinwheels—any rotating wheel-like objects—may be said to occupy a position of some prominence in African-American vernacular aesthetics, particularly in yard art or other traditions of semiotic display (Thompson 1983; Gundaker 1996, 2005). Grey Gundaker argues that all of these may be classed as "signs of circular motion," and serve to evoke:

> ...the rising and setting of the sun – the cyclical dimensions of time in nature – and the continuities underlying change. As signs of progress and

2 See also Thompson (1983), MacGaffey (1988), and Brown (1990).

3 Perhaps most convincing, however, is the fact that the singular form for the Kikongo word for these spirit containers, known both in African and New World recensions of Kongo religion-*Nkisi*—shares a marked phonetic resemblance to the name of the spirit in Hyatt: "Unkus." (Wehmeyer, 2000).

4 This description might be augmented by acquaintance with figural clocks which were quite popular in the South in the 1930s and '40's.

> accomplishment, wheels are also a reminder of the defeat of complacency through progressive action.
>
> GUNDAKER 2005, 31

Thompson likewise attests to the persistent presence of symbolically loaded wheels in African American sacred and secular assemblage, citing numerous examples of tires, wagon wheels, hubcaps and other spinning symbols as visual cognates to the ring shout—a fundamental trope in Black vernacular ritual (Thompson 1998, 42–43).

It should come as no surprise then, that although perhaps among the simplest of technological objects, the wheel enjoys a robust position in Conjure lore as an ideal tool for manipulating and effecting powerful *returns* or *dispatches*—forcing a thief to return stolen goods, ensuring the return of a wayward lover, or sending an enemy far away. Selections from the Hyatt corpus involving wheels are essentially variations on a common ritual practice. Various objects or substances, like splinters from a doorsill, dust from a footprint, or shoe-leather are placed in the hub of the wheel. The wheel is then either turned towards the operator with an incantation which will assuredly force the desired party to return, or else it is permitted to roll away from the operator, with the intention that its constant motion will make the unwanted party "roll off."

The following examples, from Brunswick and New Orleans, for example, are regional and cultural variants of a ritual described in one chapter of the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, an occult text already established as having considerable influence on the rites of conjure:[5]

> If a thief had been to yo' home an' dey stolen anything, yo' go an' cut chew three splinters off de do'[door]. *Yo' take de wagon wheel an' take de nut off it an' put dose three splinters in dere an' put de wheel back on, an' den yo' turn de wheel slower. Yo' say to de thief, "Thief, thief, bring back de stolen goods,"* Yo' call his name three times. "*An' as shuah as de Virgin Mary shall*

5 The version of the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses published by deLaurence, Scott, and Co. (Chicago, IL) in 1910, includes the following ritual prescription against a thief: "Therefore, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *take three small pieces of wood from the door-sill over which the thief passed in leaving the place where he committed the theft, place them within a wagon-wheel, and then through the hub of the wheel say the following words: 'I pray thee, thou Holy Trinity, that thou mayest cause A, who stole from me B, a, C, to have no rest or peace until he again restores me that which he has stolen.'* Turn the wheel round three times and replace it again on the wagon" (p. 133).

> *not bring forth another son named Jesus, yo' shall bring back de stolen goods"—Brunswick, Georgia.*
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 13405

> Yo' can take a wheel off a wagon an' dere's a word yo' use, but ah can't speak, but ah know it's in Hebrew. *An' yo' spins dis wheel.* An' at a certain time dey'll [thief will] bring it back—*New Orleans, Louisiana.*
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 8947

Thieves are not the only objects of Conjure's traditions of cyclical sorcery. Desired romantic partners or unwanted suitors can be constrained to come and go at the will of the operator by rotating the wheel:

> Wanta turn a woman roun'If she gone away from dere, turn dat wheel - turn it right now, if yo' wanta turn her back. If yo' wanta run her off, turn it right an' let her go' an' if yo' wanta bring her back, jes' turn it back to de center - jes' turn dat wheel back—*Florence, South Carolina.*
>
> HYATT 1970, entry 13795

A subsequent example calls to mind the ritual involving the "magic drawing glasses" discussed earlier, as it too incorporates herbal *and* technological elements by "dressing" the wheel with dust from the victim's foot print and with the poisonous irritant *arum triphyllum* or "Indian Turnip" (Hyatt 1970, entry 13407). Another from New Orleans makes use of shoe leather—a common ingredient in Hoodoo rituals intended to *move* a friend, foe, or paramour (Hyatt 1970, entry 13408).

This widespread employment of wheels in conjure work sheds light on a lurid mystery involving a famous (perhaps notorious) rootworker from New Jersey known as Dr. Hyghcock.[6] Mentioned in a litany of working clairvoyants by one of Hyatt's informants, Hyghcock was a healer and spiritual leader, offering consultations, church services, love magic, and—as the police would claim, abortions—to a largely female constituency in the Trenton/Camden area during the early 1920's. Under trumped-up charges of murder, Police arrested

6 "Doctor" is one of the more common titles taken by rootworkers in the Southeast, perhaps most famously by the legendary South Carolina healer, "Dr. Buzzard." The title is more than self-aggrandizing affectation, however—it is a term used almost ubiquitously by those who believe in conjure to denote knowledge and expertise in the craft. Whether they take it upon themselves or not, specialists are often referred to by others as "Root Doctors" or "Conjure Doctors" (see Jackson 1976; and Brown 1990).

Hyghcock and raided a complex of rooms and tunnels he'd excavated under his Trenton home. According to reports and interrogation transcripts published in newspapers nationwide, Hyghcock's secret rooms were filled with "Wires, bells, complicated signaling devices" and "networks of ropes and pulleys." An article in the Camden Courier maintains that one room "held a large cartwheel daubed with streaks of white paint on each spoke, mounted on a short upright axis set into the ground, permitting its rotation. Above the wheel was suspended a stuffed bird. The legs could be made to twitch and the wings to flap by the manipulation of a set of strings attached to them" ("*'Voodoo' is held for murder"* 1925). Another room tellingly contained "a baptismal font, a large Bible, and a carriage wheel with various colored spokes. *The wheel spins from an iron peg driven into the wall*" (*Voodoo Man confesses Bigamy* 1925.) [Emphasis mine]. Sensational press accounts call these objects "the wheel of vengeance" and "the wheel of fate" correspondingly (*Secrets of Vicious Voodoo Doctors* 1926). Yet we might readily assume these wheels were employed in rites like those described by Hyatt's informants, especially since the Camden Courier-Post subsequently reports the following incantation found in one of Hyghcock's confiscated notebooks:

> In the name of the father, son, and holy spirit, you devil, you, I want you to go just as far as God all Mighty's wind and water and fire can possibly carry, who carry you away no more no more to return throughing [sic] over your shoulder holding your right hand, *Wheel turn quick*. Don't look back March away) [Emphasis mine].
>
> Mystic's 'Library' full of weird jargon 1926

Peering *behind* the prurient and sensationalistic media accounts of Hyghcock's elaborate underground constructions, we find resonances with the sophisticated traditions of African-American yard-art documented by Thompson and Gundaker—art which often encodes esoteric knowledge and revelation. Vernacular visionaries like Henry Dorsey, whose electrokinetic yard sculptures incorporate fan-blades, hubcaps, tires and other whirling images are *conjuring* with technology—establishing these wheels as what Thompson calls "personal idioms of transcendence" (Thompson 1983). And yet that idiom is far from purely personal, as we see conjure doctors like Rev. Hyghcock, and Hyatt's informants interpreting and re-interpreting the self-same objects in comparable ways.[7]

7 We must also consider the techno-hermeneutic aspects of Minister Louis Farrakhan's ecstatic vision of the UFO-like "Mother Wheel," which Stephen C. Finley articulates as an "internalized image of perfection" which can be read as "that unchanging, transcendental technology that ultimately defines black bodies everywhere" (Finley 2012: 450, 448).

Steamfunk Spirits—Mechanical Mojo in Afro-Atlantic Speculative Fiction

The investiture of technological and mechanical objects with esoteric and spiritual significance, the employment of the image of technology as a code for spiritual presence and power, the creative integration of mechanical and botanical elements in one metaphysical system—these are the hallmarks of techno-hermeneutics in African-American vernacular esotericism. While these traditions continue to exert strong influences on the narratives and material arts associated with African American spiritualities, they can be discerned as well in the works of African-American dramatists, and writers of science fiction and magical realism. In the staging instructions for *A Black Mass* (1965), LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka indicates that the scene should include "the outline of some fantastic chemical laboratory…with weird mixtures bubbling, colored solutions (or solutions that glow in the dark)…signs in Arabic and Swahili on the walls. Strange drawings, diagrams of weird machines" (Jones 1969). The play is Jones' masterful retelling of the Nation of Islam's cosmogonic myth of the ancient Islamic Wizard-Scientist Jacoub, whose unholy experiments create White people, and bring evil into the world. In this play, which Alondra Nelson has convincingly glossed as a "Black Frankenstein" (2006), Jones blends the imagery of science and technology with ideas of magic, sorcery and spiritual craft. Nation of Islam sacred history holds that Yakub/Jacoub was inspired while playing with magnets as a child, and Jones imaginatively expands this technological imagery to include a "fantastic chemical laboratory" and "diagrams of weird machines." The *sounds* of sorcery in this play are likewise mechanical—klaxons and sirens. It is clear that Jones is critiquing and, to some degree, condemning these occult technologies as disruptive and evil, but they are no less spiritually powerful for being spiritually dangerous. What matters most is that they are inextricable from his vision of magic and sorcery (even of the most sinister sort).

In more recent decades, "Afrofuturist" writers and authors of Afro-centric speculative fiction have also explored intersections between traditional Afro-Atlantic esotericism and images and icons of technology. Nalo Hopkinson's work, in particular, demonstrates a developing techno-hermeneutic trajectory. In her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Hopkinson envisions a dystopian future Toronto in which a disenfranchised multi-ethnic underclass *opposes* a technologically advanced, largely White, hegemony with an earthy blend of pan-Caribbean supernatural belief, folk-healing, and trance-possession ritual. In subsequent writings, this dichotomy begins to break down, as Hopkinson begins to *conjure with* technology herself, imagining esoteric

aspects of African-derived mystery religions as technological realities in an Afrofuturist vision. In her novel *Midnight Robber*, for example, Anansi—Ashanti/Caribbean spider-trickster—and Nana Buruku, Yoruba earth goddess and ground-of-all-being, become fused as "Granny Nanny"[8] a nano-technological neural network facilitating communication between the human colonists on Planet Toussaint (Hopkinson 2000). Contemporary Afro-centrist fantasy author and blogger Balogun Ojetade has issued a passionate call for Black voices in the wildly popular steampunk genre of speculative fiction, as a corrective to what he sees as a romantic whitewashing (literal and figurative) of the 19th century in a genre which tends to skirt "issues of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism and imperialism" (Ojetade—*What is Steamfunk?*, 2012). Ojetade's own contribution to the emergent *Steamfunk* subgenre, *Moses: The Chronicles of Harriet Tubman,* is replete with steam-powered dirigibles, a swashbuckling Harriet Tubman, and *Knolls*—menacing supernatural creatures like animated hillocks made of roots and earth, each bearing "a bronze clock the size of a dinner plate" in its chest (Ojetade—*Moses*, 2012). Ojetade's conjuring with technology in the realm of popular fiction brings us squarely back to the mysterious clockwork homunculus described by Hyatt's *Unkus Man*, and suggests how powerfully these tropes resonate with African American visions of the otherworldly, supernatural, and esoteric.

I've provided only a handful of examples here, and limited analysis, but I think at this juncture a number of key points are evident. These are not isolated, anomalous elements in the Conjure corpus. Their geographic distribution, multiple variation and persistence through time suggest that we are dealing with stable traditions in Black Vernacular esotericism—no less stable or influential than the botanical traditions more popularly associated with Rootwork. These traditions, moreover, resonate with comparable currents in African American visual, literary, and dramatic arts. This complex, yet entirely sensible interweaving of technological and spiritual themes, this use of technological symbols to express subtle spiritual knowledge—this propensity for "techno-hermenutics"—challenges essentialist visions of Hoodoo as an exclusively or even primarily "natural" esoteric practice, and further challenges stereotypical perceptions of its practitioners as simple folk steeped in rural natural wisdom. The Conjure Woman or Rootsman needs to be seen instead as a sophisticated *bricoleur*, to whom even the most modern conveniences and gadgets provide tools for exploring and working the world of spirit. Like its musical cousin, the Blues, Conjure is an accretive, adaptive art, and defies attempts to rigidly restrict its boundaries or instrumentation. Ultimately, the

8 Or sometimes "Granny 'Nansi"—shorthand for the "Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface."

recognition of techno-hermeneutic traditions as an essential current in African American folk magic helps to free us from a crippling insistence that Black esoteric thought and practice is fundamentally anachronistic, exclusively naturalistic, and disengaged from modernity. The "conjurational contraptions" found in the folk record invite us to consider a sophisticated vernacular esotericism whose narratives and material culture are marked, not just by roots, but by gears, wheels, and wires as well.